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Nuptial Mysteries

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There was a time when the Christian ethics of marriage were largely concerned with the question of premarital sex. Was it possible for Christian couples to do it before they got married, and if so, how far could they go? But at the beginning of the twenty-first century the moral climate is very different. Now the United States Conference of Bishops, in its pastoral letter on *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* (2009), relegates the question to the end of its reflections on the troubles of marriage. Of course the letter is clear that premarital sex is fornication and harmful to the success of marriage, but fornication is not the most worrying thing considered by the bishops. While for others—for many of the fornicators, including Christian ones—the question is not whether to have sex, but whether to get married. Marriage has become suspect, something that is more likely to hinder than fulfil life.

Given this suspicion, and given the decline in the number of those getting married in western society, it is fascinating to learn that at the same time as real marriage is declining, a sort of fantasy marriage has been on the rise in Catholic theology, rising to a place of fundamental importance.¹ Under the guise of nuptiality—the nuptial mystery—marriage has become the defining characteristic of the human being as such.² This, at any rate, is the claim of

¹ The United Kingdom Office for National Statistics reports that in 2009 there were 231,490 marriages in England and Wales, the lowest number since 1895 when there were 228,204 reported marriages, but only half the population of 2009's estimated 61 million people in the United Kingdom.

² See Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, translated by Michelle K. Borras (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005); and for nuptial theology outside of

Fergus Kerr, in his ecclesial comedy, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (2007).³

It has long been supposed that there is something about being human that is like being God; that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. It has also been long disputed as to whether the “image” and “likeness” are different things or the same thing, and if one thing what it is that makes us God-like. But on the whole, the tradition has supposed it to be reason, and coupled with reason, free will: our ability to act upon reflection. This supposedly marks us out from all other animals, and allows us to participate, if only by reflection, in the reasoning—the *logos*—of God. But now things have changed, and the Catholic Church, on Kerr’s account, has broken “with centuries of tradition”.⁴ Now the Church locates the *imago Dei* not in our reason, but in our readiness to couple with members of the opposite sex. Our bodies are naturally nuptial, and in this reflect the conjugality of the Trinity: an eternal matrimony.

The Rise of Nuptial Mysticism

There are perhaps three main players in the rise of nuptial mysticism, in the advent and realisation of that theology which sees the marriage of Christ and his Church in the union of all Christian spouses. These players are Pope John Paul II, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, and Ratzinger again, but now transformed into Pope Benedict XVI. But chief among these is John Paul II, who through his Wednesday catecheses, delivered between September 1979 and November 1984,⁵ developed a theology of the body—an anthropology of nuptiality—that led in time to what Kerr describes as “an entirely new doctrine of the human

Catholicism see *Human Sexuality and the Nuptial Mystery*, edited by Roy R. Jeal (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010).

³ Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

⁴ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 199.

⁵ Available as John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, translated and introduced by Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006 [1997]).

creature as ‘image of God’”.⁶ But behind John Paul II there are other figures, not least of whom is Hans Urs von Balthasar, and with Balthasar, the visionary Adrienne von Speyr. Also named are Henri de Lubac and Teilhard de Chardin.⁷ But in this genealogy Kerr also places Karl Barth, who as early as 1948 was arguing that the *imago Dei* was to be found in the couple rather than in Adam or Eve alone.⁸ Barth is mentioned, of course, because his reimagining of God’s image within us was, as Kerr notes, regarded at the time “as a radical break with centuries of tradition, and certainly not welcomed by Catholics.”⁹ And Kerr is surely not wrong to hear a Protestant note in Catholicism’s growing interest in marriage and marital symbolics. For the Protestant Reformation threw out the virtue of celibacy, which had so dominated the first millennium of the Church’s life. And while a celibate life remains virtuous, even pre-eminently virtuous, within Catholicism, marriage has attained a celebrity that would have surprised many in the early Church.

Something of the new interest in the nuptiality of the body was already developing at the Second Vatican Council, when—with what Kerr describes as “typical creative amnesia”—the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) dropped the primary and secondary ends of marriage and replaced them with a “kind of friendship”, a mutual self-giving that was to be perfectly expressed in the “marital act”. Children were not ruled out, but marriage was no longer “instituted solely for procreation”. Indeed a marriage without children was as good as one with.¹⁰ Kerr reads this as a definitive rejection of any Manichaean tendencies, any devaluing of the body and its joys. At the time some saw this “personalist” emphasis on conjugal love as

⁶ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 201.

⁷ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 201. On de Lubac see Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, pp. 81-83.

⁸ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, pp. 197-98. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, edited by G. W. Bromilley and T. F. Torrance, 4 vols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963-75), III/2 §41; III/3 §54.

⁹ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 198.

¹⁰ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 217.

sentimentalism,¹¹ but with hindsight it was also paving the way for the nuptial theology that was to be developed by John Paul II.

The new nuptial theology that John Paul II came to promulgate begins with the first three chapters of Genesis, which the pope describes as the “immutable basis of all Christian anthropology”.¹² Though immutability might be the last thing that one would think of ascribing to Genesis. For if any text is polymorphous and multivalent it is surely this text. As soon as one begins to read Genesis one has to interpret, an interpretation that has always already begun in the translation of an obscure, long-debated Hebrew. Genesis, in Christian theology, has always had to bear an immense weight of later commitments and ideological presuppositions.¹³

Chief among these weights is the view that the story tells us about the inauguration of matrimony. Thus John Paul II tells us that “in the same context as the creation of man and woman, the biblical account speaks of God’s instituting marriage as an indispensable condition for the transmission of life to which marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordered: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (Genesis 1:28).” This is a heavy reading for a number of reasons. First, as everyone knows, marriage is not an “indispensible condition” for transmitting life, which can be done without marriage, unless marriage is here a euphemism for having sex, which was, until recently, an “indispensible condition” for life’s transmission. Moreover, marriage is barely mentioned in the first two chapters of Genesis, appearing only at the last, when the story of Adam and Eve is used to underwrite the practice of a man leaving his parents for his woman or wife (*issa*) and having sex with her—becoming “one flesh” together (Genesis 2:24). That practice might seem universal, but it is of course particular; in particular it was not a practice followed by John Paul II. Moreover, by the time readers get to Genesis 4:15 they find that the earth is

¹¹ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 218.

¹² Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 194.

¹³ I use “ideology” with the sense that Roland Barthes gave the term: the pretence to universality claimed by particular interests. See further Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and translated by Annette Lavers (London: Cape, 1972 [1957]).

already populated and subdued by other people than Adam and Eve and their two sons, Cain and Abel, so the pressure to reproduce is not as great as Adam and Eve might have thought at first, at the end of chapter 1. Nor will it do to remember those church fathers—such as Maximus the Confessor—who speculated that sexual reproduction was a compensation for the loss of Eden, with the prior injunction to multiply (Genesis 1:22) referring to an asexual form of reproduction, a more miraculous filling of the earth.¹⁴ For such fathers, marriage is not original at creation's beginning, but a compensatory fruit of the fall. Indeed, for Maximus, the arrival of Christ, who did not marry, does away with the "difference and division of nature into male and female".¹⁵

Whether ignorant or indifferent to the fact of intersexed bodies, John Paul II insists that everyone is either male or female. Genesis says it is so, and so it must be. Moreover, Adam finding Eve to be "flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2.23) and in due course becoming "one flesh" with her—though the story would suggest there was only ever one flesh—is read as the discovery that man is for woman and woman for man, and that this self-gift of one to the other is the *imago Dei* in us. Kerr finds this line of thought "extraordinary".

John Paul II argues that the triune God of love made man, male and female, to image Himself fully in their communion of persons, a

¹⁴ Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua (Difficulties)*, 41; Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* (Paris 1865), vol. 91, 1309A; translated in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 157. See also Gregory of Nyssa, *On Human Creation* in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* (1864), vol. 44, 205A. Gregory is quite clear that the *imago Dei* is not the difference of man and woman for there is no such difference in the divine. See also John Damascene in *Genesis I-II*, edited by Andrew Louth (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 41; and also Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 144. I would like to thank Charidimos Koutris for help in researching this material, the use of which here remains entirely my responsibility. Thomas Aquinas was aware of such views as those of Gregory and the Damascene (*Summa Theologica*, 1a, 98, 2), but chose to follow Augustine in thinking that coitus was intended from the first, but without that "extravagance of desire which [now] disfigures it" (1a, 98, 2, *responsio*).

¹⁵ Maximus in Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, p. 157.

communion made possible precisely because of their sexual complementarity as revealed in the nuptial meaning of their bodies, the sign that the male person is intended by God as a “gift” to the female person and vice versa. Male and female are shaped physically so as to give themselves away to each other in love, to become one flesh, and in so doing, to open themselves to the gift of fertility and thus to image even more fully the God who made them.¹⁶

This teaching is extraordinary because, as it is developed, it comes to ground sexual ethics, not in natural law but in a nuptial reading of scripture. Natural law thinking is rendered redundant, and “Catholic Christian ethics, in regard to marriage”, comes to depend “entirely on the nuptial meaning of the body as revealed in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis.”¹⁷ It is not implausible to see this as a strategic development, for as Kerr observes, arguments from natural law with regard to such matters as contraception have “failed to convince most people”.¹⁸ But it is surely extraordinary for another reason as well, one that Kerr does not quite spell out. For as this thinking comes to fruition in, for example, Joseph Ratzinger’s 2004 *Letter to the Bishops of the Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women*, it is the body’s spousal significance—which is to say its heterosexuality¹⁹—that becomes the image of God in humanity. There is no image of God in the homosexual, and since the image of God is the mark of humanity, no homosexual is fully human.

¹⁶ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, pp. 178-79.

¹⁷ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 179.

¹⁸ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 179.

¹⁹ The equation of spousal significance with heterosexuality is not of course necessary, but contingent. Two people of the same sex can also be spouses to one another, as in the marriage of Christ and Church: for “all human beings—both women and men—are called through the Church, to be the ‘Bride’ of Christ” (John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [London: Catholic Truth Society, 1988], VII, § 25, p. 94). Indeed, just insofar as the marriage of Christ and Church is polygamous and bisexual, marriage is fundamentally *queer* before it is heterosexual. But the equation of heterosexuality and spousal significance is presented as necessary in the nuptial ideology under consideration; its ideological character confirmed by such a presentation.

Kerr seems more concerned with the loss of earlier, more traditional, and more thomistic ways of thinking the image of God. For Thomas Aquinas the human being is *imago Dei* “solely in virtue of mind” and not of body. The human being is in the image of God because “an intelligent being endowed with free will and self movement”.²⁰ Nuptial anthropology replaces this with heterosexual yearning, and relates the latter to the relationship between the Church and Christ, bride and bridegroom, which is the true nuptial mystery that comes to light in the self-giving of every bride and of every groom; the mystical in the bedroom. Kerr seems even more unnerved by the claim that bride and bridegroom are more than metaphors,²¹ and quickly notes that metaphors, “however rich and imaginative, ... need to be subjected to the ontological interpretation of the divine names in age-old Catholic tradition.”²² He is happier thinking of God as pure act—the primary cause, the one who is—rather than as a bridegroom to our bride.²³ But behind much of this we may suppose Balthasar, who allows a certain interpretation of human sexuality to run all the way up into God and then back down again to earth, where it reifies that from which it sprang.²⁴

²⁰ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 194.

²¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Angelo Amato, *Letter to the Bishops of the Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2004), § 9.

²² Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 200.

²³ Kerr notes that Joseph Ratzinger, in his *Introduction to Christianity* (London: Burns and Oates, 1969 [1968]), affirms God as being, but carefully derives this from Exodus rather than from Thomas—*Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 191.

²⁴ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, pp. 135-137. For a critique of Balthasar’s projection onto God—and from there back to earth—of wholly human realities (a certain contingent construal of human realities) see Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 152-161.

History and Ideology

Francesca Murphy asserts that Kerr has learned to “write history at the feet of John Milbank”.²⁵ And this is not a good thing. For it is to pursue the truth in an ideological, non-historical manner. History is not allowed to get in the way of ideology. Thus Murphy contends that Kerr bends history to the “ideological opposition” he has set up between neoscholasticism, on the one hand, and nuptial mysticism, on the other.²⁶

I cannot pursue all the points of Murphy’s charge, and of course she has an eye to the central argument of Kerr’s book, which is to present twentieth-century Catholic theology as a story of rival interpretations of Thomas Aquinas, with whose theology Pope Leo XIII had thought to inoculate the Church against the inroads of Enlightenment reason.²⁷ Here my interest only extends to Murphy’s contention that Kerr’s presentation of nuptial mysticism is overwrought. And her most decisive point in this regard is to cite a passage from John Paul II’s encyclical letter on the dignity of women, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), in which she finds the *imago Dei* to be not so much the couple in opposition to reason, as reason in the couple. Murphy contends that Kerr “can’t very well cite this encyclical, because ... his ideology has no room for the text’s ‘not only ... but also’”.²⁸ But Kerr, for what it’s worth, does cite the encyclical, though as quoted within the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women*, rather than directly.²⁹

²⁵ Francesca Murphy, “Fergus Kerr’s *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62.2 (2009) 185-194 (p. 187). Ironically, Milbank’s own response to Kerr’s book is close to Murphy’s. See John Milbank, “The New Divide: Romantic Versus Classical Orthodoxy”, *Modern Theology* 26/1 (2010) 26-38.

²⁶ Murphy, “Fergus Kerr”, p. 193.

²⁷ See also Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) and *Contemplating Aquinas: On the Varieties of Interpretation*, edited by Fergus Kerr (London: SCM Press, 2003).

²⁸ Murphy, “Fergus Kerr”, p. 193.

²⁹ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 194; quoting Ratzinger and Amato, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women*, § 6; quoting John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, III, § 6 (p. 21).

In his encyclical, John Paul II affirms the old view than “man” is a “rational being (*animal rationale*)” and in this like God.³⁰ But then he finds the Trinity mirrored in Adam and Eve’s mutual companionability. This does not supplant but supplements their imaging of God’s reason in their own. The fact that man “created as man and woman” is the image of God means not only that each of them is like God, as rational and free beings. It also means that man and woman, created as a “unity of the two” in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion that is in God, through which the three persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.³¹

But even if John Paul II does not here oppose nuptiality to rationality, and so is less confrontational in this regard than Murphy charges Kerr with supposing him to be, Kerr is surely not incorrect in saying that this teaching regarding the unity of the two is “not what theologians have classically taught.”³² Moreover, it is not just that theologians thought little beyond reason and will as the image of God, for Kerr argues that someone like Thomas Aquinas could find Adam and Eve imaging the Trinity. For Thomas the idea of the *imago Dei* is a dynamic one, with the acts of knowing and willing imitating the processions of the Trinity, the coming forth of Son and Spirit, Word and Love.³³ Kerr is thus surprised—perhaps dismayed?—that this dynamic trinitarian anthropology is simply set aside in favour of what he considers an “innovatory doctrine of sexual difference as the human creature’s way of imaging God.”³⁴ Of course, Kerr finds it set aside by Joseph Ratzinger, and chiefly in his 2004 Letter on the *Collaboration of Men and Women*. The nuptial anthropology is not to be found in the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,³⁵ so that the innovation arrives in the twelve years between 1992 and 2004; a period in which the theology of the *imago Dei*

³⁰ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, III, § 6 (p. 19).

³¹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, III, § 7 (pp. 22-23).

³² Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 195.

³³ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 195.

³⁴ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 195.

³⁵ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 196.

“that has held sway for 2,000 years” is occluded through the “characteristic Roman Catholic talent for creative amnesia”.³⁶

Thus it is not evident that Murphy’s appeal to *Mulieris Dignitatem* undermines Kerr’s claim that between 1992 and 2004 a new nuptial anthropology displaced an older one that was also able to cast the *imago Dei* in trinitarian terms, and that was open to finding relationality at the heart of the image, but not confined to the relation of marriage; and not—as I have suggested nuptial theology would have us think—in heterosexuality alone. *Mulieris Dignitatem* is perhaps best seen as a transitional text, which still remembers the older tradition while looking to the new that was even then emerging. Kerr is happy to celebrate—as “magnificent”—the International Theological Commission’s *Communion and Stewardship* of 2004, which, with Ratzinger’s approval, found communion between people, and between people and God, to be what makes humanity like God, and which praised marriage as “one of the best analogies of the Trinitarian life”.³⁷

³⁶ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 196.

³⁷ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 197; International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (2004). Kerr’s apparent enthusiasm for this document is perhaps a little surprising, given that Augustine, whom Thomas sought to follow, thought the family a very poor, if not an offensive analogy for the Trinity. If nothing else (and there is a lot else), it must surely offend against the equality of the divine persons. See Augustine, *The Trinity*, translated by Edmund Hill OP (New York: New City Press, 1991) bk XII, ch. 2 (pp. 324-327); and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, 42. Augustine is clear that any one man images the three divine persons, and not three people the one God; and Thomas agrees. The image of God is not between the sexes, but in each of them, “since it is in the mind, wherein there is no sexual distinction.” *Summa Theologica*, 1a, 93, 6, *ad secundum*. Of course Balthasar thinks differently, finding the nuclear family to be a very fit image for the Trinity, and the ever-startling Scola simply notes that Augustine and Thomas cannot be opposed to such a reading. But they can. See Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, p. 368 n. 27; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 64.

Reasons for the Rise of Nuptial Mysticism

I began with the irony that marriage as *imago Dei* has arisen at the same time as the practice of vowed marriage has declined. And we may well wonder why this has been so. Kerr does not really offer an answer, though he does note that Ratzinger's *Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women* (2004) was "prompted by the challenge of feminism",³⁸ and that the couple as the image of God "may well be both more biblical and more relevant in the climate of modern feminism".³⁹ But this last suggestion must be tongue in cheek, for Kerr surely knows that few feminists would affirm that woman's identity is dependent on man's in way that man's is not on woman's. If woman is in the image of God she can be so in her own right and not insofar as she is hitched to a man. And as if to make the point, Kerr goes on to note how the letter on the *Collaboration of Men and Women* defines woman as the one who humanises the man through her femininity.⁴⁰ Perhaps woman is more fully human than man, and so able to provide the humanity he lacks; perhaps some men are humanised through their congress with women. Is there an excess of humanity in woman, such that she can bestow it on man? Or is it that the woman has that which, when joined to the man, brings the human fully into view in the man, the woman being that otherwise missing part of him—taken from him in the mythical garden—that gives him fully to himself as human? As complement, woman is that *supplement* which returns man to himself; a supplement being that which is needed and not needed at the same time. The logic is not reciprocated, however, because the woman comes to herself as man's supplement; in that she is *fulfilled*.⁴¹ As Adam

³⁸ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 193.

³⁹ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 199.

⁴⁰ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 201.

⁴¹ As John Paul II has it, "femininity in some way finds itself before masculinity, while masculinity confirms itself through femininity." They do not need each other in the same way; femininity is the confirmation of masculinity—you know you are a man when you know you are not a woman; you know you are a woman when you have confirmed man in his knowledge of himself—which is knowledge of what he is not. See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, translated and introduced by Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006 [1997]), p. 166 (General Audience 21 November 1979). No wonder Angelo Scola—expounder of John Paul II and Hans

Cooper puts it, man in Adam is “human (and male) before her [Eve/woman]; she is human (and female) only with him.”⁴² Without him she is nothing.

So it is unlikely that nuptial mysticism was intended to appease feminism, or if it was, it is unlikely to succeed, for it continually thinks of woman, not as another to man, but as man’s other, his projected other half, his nicer self, and so very much flesh of *his* flesh. Woman is that in man, which, once extruded, can return to him as that other (and not other) which confirms himself.⁴³ But in fact Kerr intimates a different cause for the growing interest in God’s marital image. For the 2004 Letter warns that considering women as independent of men, or as the same as men, would lead to making “homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality”.⁴⁴ This is the great fear, which requires the finding of a middle way between the absolute difference and the absolute similarity of man and woman.

But is the third way—woman as the same but different from man—a middle way at all? For surely the two radically different ways—absolute difference and absolute similarity—are really the same thing: woman as man’s equal. For woman as different to man is an other to man and so his possible equal, and woman as the same as man is another man and so his equal. Thus both options pose the threat of woman’s equality, and must be opposed with the idea of woman as man’s complement or supplement, as always dependent on man, and so never his equal. In this way of thinking—the mess that is nuptial mysticism⁴⁵—the name for the feared equality of man and woman is

Urs von Balthasar—finds an “abysmal dissimilarity” between man and woman. See Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, p. 285.

⁴² Adam G. Cooper, *Life in the Flesh: An Anti-Gnostic Spiritual Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 25.

⁴³ See Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, p. 381. “You, woman, are as fully person as I, man. Yet you are this in a way that is radically different from my own, so decisive and so inaccessible. You are, precisely, *other*.”

⁴⁴ Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, p. 193.

⁴⁵ Nuptial mysticism is a “mess” in that it is a mixture of ideas and slogans that are not entirely coherent, and as such they “mess with the head” of anyone who tries to think them through. Thus at one point Adam and Eve will be similar (as indeed Genesis has it) and the next insuperably dissimilar (as Scola wants it). In this, nuptial mysticism is like much of the “church’s bureaucratic speech about sexual morality”, which consists in “scripts for preventing serious speech by

“homosexuality”. For the latter imagines relationships between terms that are not complementary, with one dependent on the other, but radically interdependent—because a relationship between those whom both ancient and modern cultures code as socially equal, as between two men or two women.

Homosexuality is the threat that Ratzinger must face down, not only because it exposes the not so latent homoeroticism at the heart of Christian symbolics—which includes the relationship of Christian men to Christ, as brides to his groom—but also because modern homosexuality—as idea and practice—undoes complementarity, through imagining—though not necessarily achieving—relationships of genuine equality.⁴⁶ The idea and practice of homosexuality threatens the gender inequality enshrined in the nuptial reading of Genesis, that is both espoused and practiced in the Church; and repeated in every infantilised ecclesial relationship, as between pope and bishop, bishop and priest, priest and lay.

The position of the subordinate is always that of the “child”, is always that of Eve, who is literally Adam’s child, born from his side.⁴⁷ The relationship of

scrambling it.” Nuptial mysticism similarly uses “unstable terminology, incoherent principles, fallacious argument.” This judgment is borrowed from Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 11.

⁴⁶ The relationship of Christ to the Church is of course polygamous and bisexual, since the Church is a multi-membered/gendered body, a collective noun. Thomas Aquinas almost admits as much when he notes that “Christ, even if he had a single Church as a bride, nevertheless has many persons within one Church as brides; but the soul cannot be the bride of any other but Christ.” See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Q 3, art 2; cited in David d’Avry, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 147. Marriage thus signifies the polygamous relationship between Christ and his Church.

⁴⁷ George Tyrrell notes that Eve is taken from Adam’s “very substance, in a sense his child, his offspring; bound to him with all the ties that bind child to parent, and with others not less close and tender.” George Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery” in *Hard Sayings: A Selection of Meditations and Studies* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1898), 220-260 (p. 222). Though Tyrrell was an ardent student of Thomas, this is not exactly a thomistic thought, since Thomas curtly remarks that woman “was not produced from man by natural generation, but by the Divine Power alone. Wherefore Eve is not called the daughter of Adam” (*Summa Theologica*, 1a, 92, 2, *ad tertium*). In this he follows Augustine (*The Trinity*, bk XII, ch. 2, § 5). But clearly Thomas has had to allow that there

complementarity is one of adult and child, albeit a child available for sexual favours and procreative services. At the symbolic level this is evident in the Genesis story, which remains the fantasised reversal of man's dependency on woman. Rather woman is dependent on man, as Thomas Aquinas makes clear when he explains why Eve was not made from the same slime as was used for Adam. Alone coming from the earth gives Adam a "certain dignity", as proper to the one who is to be the "principle of the whole human race". Moreover, Eve's dependent dignity allows the man to cleave all the more to the woman, "knowing her to be fashioned from himself". Adam and Eve's (incestuous) consanguinity all the better enables their "domestic life" together, "in which each has his or her particular duty, and in which the man is the head of the woman. Wherefore it was suitable for the woman to be made out of man, as out of her principle." And finally, of course, woman's dependency on man signifies that of the Church on Christ.⁴⁸

Against this, the idea and practice of homosexuality imagines genuinely equal and adult relationships, though only in contexts where sexual relationships are not imagined as asymmetrical, as they are in most societies, and as they are endlessly played out in both Hollywood dramas and Vatican encyclicals. Such an imagining of sexual relationships was not possible in the ancient societies of the Bible's birth, where same-sex relationships between men were almost invariably imagined as pederastic, as between man and boy, with the latter taking the part of the "woman" (the dependent, degraded term). It is only in the modern period, and really only in the latter half of the twentieth century, that homosexual relationships could begin to evidence a true equality, a genuine friendship in the domain of sexuality. But this development threatens the Church's age-old way of

might be reason to think that Eve is too closely related to Adam for their marriage to be altogether seemly.

⁴⁸ *Summa Theologica*, 1a, 92, 2, *responsio*. For Balthasar, the relative priority of Adam to Eve becomes absolute in Christ's birthing of the Church, and since "in the mind of God the incarnate Word has never existed without his Church (Ephesians 1: 4-6)", woman has never been other than second to man; an eternal otherness. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2: *The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 413. See further Loughlin, *Alien Sex*, pp. 156-157.

thinking, which is riven with the inequality of what is now called the heterosexual relationship, or the heterosexual relationship as imagined until recent times. Adam and Eve were not friends, if by friends we mean a relationship of social equals.⁴⁹ They are not so pictured in Genesis, or at least in Genesis as read by those who espouse nuptial complementarity.

To be sure, marriage is often a friendship, and was often presented as such, but not the kind of friendship that could exist between social equals. Aristotle, whose thinking about friendship (*philia*) was to be determinative for so much of later western tradition, noted the necessity of equality for friendship, but that the friendship of husband and wife is not between equals, since it is between a superior and his subordinate. The equity has to be proportionate. The husband will love the wife, but the wife must love the husband more, for he is more than she.⁵⁰ If, in time, this proportion has come to seem disproportionate, an overvaluing of the husband in relation to the wife, it has yet to seem so for exponents of nuptial mysticism. The wife remains subject to her husband's kingly rule; their friendship subject to their inequality.

Even a modernist like George Tyrrell, harbinger of a liberalism to come, and writing at a time when women were beginning to agitate for an equal footing in society with men, could not bring himself to imagine other than a dependency of women on men, of wives on their husbands. Tyrrell is clear that woman is not only, or not even for the sake of reproduction, but for helping man in the spiritual task of saving his soul through true worship of the Lord. Thus she too has a soul to save.⁵¹ But of course, her assistance is principally through being

⁴⁹ After Aristotle we might say that Adam and Eve enjoyed a friendship of utility and pleasure, since much of Christian tradition believes that Eve was created in order to aid Adam in the work of procreation, which was pleasurable. So Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, 92, 1, *responsio*; and 1a, 98, 2, *ad tertium*, where he notes that in the "state of innocence", the "pleasurable sensation" would not have been less intense than subsequently, but indeed "all the greater, given the greater purity of man's nature and sensibility of his body." For Aristotle, see his *Ethics*, translated by J. A. K. Thomson, revised by Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976 [1955]) bk VIII, iii (p. 262).

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Ethics*, bk VIII, vii (p. 270).

⁵¹ Tyrrell, "A Great Mystery", p. 223.

wifely and then motherly, and through this ministry, wife and husband can become “constant companions, life-long friends.”⁵²

Tyrrell paints a rather rapturous portrait of how the wife becomes the most intimate of her husband’s friends, a spiritual as well as a physical complement. Christ is the exemplar of perfect humanity, in whom all virtues were developed without need of a consort. But such qualities are divided between husband and wife, so that together they might imitate their model, with “one abounding where the other is deficient; one strong where the other is weak; each soul fitting into the other, supplying its defects, filling its emptiness, making with it one perfect image and likeness of the ideal humanity as conceived in the mind of God.”

Nuptial theology or mysticism is already present in Tyrrell, closely following what was to come later. Tyrrell has already found the *imago dei* in the married couple, the very “image and likeness” of God’s “ideal humanity”. We might also note that to this point there is nothing that would hinder same-sex couples from exhibiting similar complementarity, and perhaps exhibiting it more profoundly just insofar as they exhibit the perfections bound together in Christ’s single sex. But lest we think Tyrrell too removed from his time and place, we should note that his division of the virtues between the sexes was entirely conventional.

It is only in man and woman, taken together, that we have the fulness and perfection of human graces and virtues; not merely the diamond in the rough, but set and cut and polished till all its brightness gleams out to perfection. We all recognize this when we speak disapprovingly of a man as womanish or effeminate, not because he possesses the special virtues of womanhood—chastity, gentleness, patience, tact, unselfishness, which would be to his greater honour and not to his discredit, but because he lacks the special virtues of manhood. And so a *virago* or masculine woman is not a *mulier fortis*, a brave, just, courageous, truth-loving woman, but

⁵² Tyrrell. “A Great Mystery”, p. 224.

one who fails in the graces that are the peculiar ornament of womanhood.⁵³

In the distinction between the “special virtues” and ornaments of womanhood and manhood—the latter being justice, strength, truth, courage, energy, generosity and liberty⁵⁴—we have a late Victorian view of the sexes. And this is why, no matter how much the wife is the spiritual equal of her husband, saving her soul through serving his, she yet has to know her place, and be reminded of it when forgetful. For just as Christ is to the church, so the husband is to the wife: the head of her body. Though “each must live for the other as for themselves”, yet there is a “true, natural, and willing subjection of the body to the head”, so that “the wife’s oneness with her husband does not free her from a willing submission to him”. As the image suggests, she is decapitated; a severance which is yet a yoke—“a yoke which is for her liberty and honour and not for her degradation, and which only galls so far as it is unlawfully resisted.”⁵⁵

Tyrrell warns against the “false principles” of “self-sufficient individualism and rationalism”, which he tends to see as Protestant, and which undergird the “modern movement in favour of the intellectual and social emancipation of women”.⁵⁶ Authority and obedience is natural in the world, in society, and in the “conjugal association”, where there is a “right of decision on the one hand and a duty of acquiescence on the other”, and who is on either hand is not hard to guess.⁵⁷ The Catholic Church attributes the “right of social superiority” to the husband. This is a “postulate of reason” and a “command of God”, and must be the case if the relation between husband and wife is

⁵³ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, p. 225.

⁵⁴ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, p. 224. Tyrrell notes that in some men these mannish virtues become vicious; the strong becoming rough, the just harsh, the courageous rash, the energetic impatient, and the generous extravagant (pp. 224-225).

⁵⁵ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, p. 238.

⁵⁶ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, pp. 241-242.

⁵⁷ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, p. 243.

“analogous to that which subsists between Christ the Head, and the Church, his body, the archetype of all social organism.”⁵⁸

The right to rule is not one that the woman has over herself and then gives up to her husband, but one that comes to the husband from God in the event of marriage, and this husbandly rule is also truthful and godly. It is how God and truth comes to the wife. Tyrrell tries to lessen the offense of this to the “pseudo-liberal mind” by distinguishing between the office and the person, and by invoking the figure of Joseph, who was superior to Mary as her husband, but not as one blessed with “light and wisdom and divine grace.”⁵⁹ Indeed Tyrrell begins to tie himself in knots once he has admitted that wives can be superior to their husbands in certain regards, for he has to come back to some underlying and persistent inferiority to justify her subjection, which of course is to be no more slavish than her husband’s rule is despotic.⁶⁰

The sexes are “complementary”,⁶¹ and yet this complementarity is that of ruler and ruled, head and body. Men are somehow imbued with a “reasoning discernment” (*discretio rationis*) that befits them for mastery, though it is weaker in some than others; stronger in some wives than in their husbands, when it can cause disturbance in the “domestic harmony”.⁶² Thus, it would seem, the Church can refuse to believe in “the *general* intellectual or moral inferiority of women”, so long as women are prepared to make the distinction “between *necessary* and *actual* inferiority”, and act the necessary even when it is actually false.⁶³ This is how Tyrrell seeks to square his circle, and once the woman acts her part, Tyrrell is eloquent in support of an equality of opportunity regarding education and

⁵⁸ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, p. 244.

⁵⁹ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, pp. 245-246.

⁶⁰ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, p. 250.

⁶¹ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, p. 251.

⁶² Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, p. 252. As Tyrrell indicates (p. 251), his account of man’s stronger and woman’s weaker discernment follows that of Thomas when he says that “the human group would have lacked the benefit of order had some of its members not been governed by others who were wiser. Such is the subjection in which woman is by nature subordinate to man, because the power of rational discernment is by nature stronger in man.” *Summa Theologica*, 1a, 92, 1, *ad secundum*.

⁶³ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, p. 253.

culture, just as long as it does not compromise those constraints of domesticity and maternity which are fixed by nature rather than by custom or “male tyranny”.⁶⁴ Woman must be happy in her subjection.

The downfall of the family, the profanation of marriage, means the downfall and profanation of woman. Whether she likes to allow it or not, it is only in virtue of a waning survival of that chivalrous spirit which Christianity created and fostered, that the “new woman”, as she is called, is able to elbow her way to the front as she does. If man is ever rebarbarized by the withdrawal of the softening influence of home, if woman becomes nothing more to him than a competitor in the general struggle for wealth, she will eventually be forced down to that degradation which has always been her lot under the reign of pure selfishness and brute force. If it is her greater unselfishness which has caused her so much suffering in the past, it has also been the cause of her great power for good.⁶⁵

Thus Tyrrell writing in 1898; sentiments that would still be expressed a century later, and on into the twenty first century. And in Tyrrell we find all the sentiments of that later nuptial mysticism which, with Kerr, we find in the writings of Balthasar or Scola, John Paul II or Benedict. We find a similar claim for the equality of men and women, for the possibility of true friendship between them, as together they image the triune mystery that has written in their flesh the law of their relationship; a claim that is at the same time undone by making their marriage the sign of Christ’s union with his Church, when that Church is always a woman’s body, and the bodies of real women—headless without a husband—are no more than its ciphers, its living symbols.

Yet all is not lost for nuptial mysticism. The arrival of same-sex marriages reminds us that Christ, in marrying the Church, marries men as well as women,

⁶⁴ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, pp. 253-254.

⁶⁵ Tyrrell, “A Great Mystery”, p. 260.

so that all are to be as “wives” to Christ, and in Christ wives to one another, where there is no longer male or female. The sexes remain, but now no longer with one subject to the other, the woman to the man, as if the man had produced the woman as his extruded other; his other, disturbing self. Now the image of divinity—of the divine relations—is found not in the conjunction of two terms, man and woman, but in a godly relationship between people, between men, and between women, and between women and men.

Now Eve does not come forth from Adam, but Adam and Eve from that human ground in which they are but two of the many people they encountered once they had left Eden, people who were already out there, living different lives, and given not by another God, but by a God who did not walk only in the garden that Adam and Eve had lost.⁶⁶ Adam and Eve are as it were the polarities between which the myriad differences that populate the earth are found; the differences that evade the simple duality that some of Adam and Eve’s descendants have imposed upon their fellows. But to gain this view one must start to see that men and women are not so different from one another; and that men are more like women and less like God than (some) men suppose; that though different, they are all the children of mothers. When Christ marries his Church, he does not make absolute the priority of Adam to Eve, as Balthasar supposed,⁶⁷ but rather the diversity of the body he marries, the multitude that he makes to be his own, multigendered body. This is the nuptiality that all marriages, same-sex and other-sex, are called to share and show: the mysticism of God’s polymorphous, nuptial body.

⁶⁶ Genesis 4 reveals that Adam and Eve, and their children, are not the only people on the earth, and so not the progenitors of the human race. They are but at the start of the biblical story.

⁶⁷ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2, p. 413.

Homosexual Panic

It is not possible to prove that nuptial mysticism, as presented in Kerr's comedy of the Church and in this chapter—nascent in Tyrrell and fully grown in Balthasar and Scola—arose in response to the growing presence of homosexual relationships in contemporary societies. This can only be suggested by observing such putative responses, as in what seems to be the homosexual panic occasioned by the rise of same-sex marriages in the period under discussion. For it is another of many ironies, that as heterosexuals have lost interest in marriage, homosexuals have started to demand it for themselves. It is in the face of this alarming prospect that the Church has redefined the *imago Dei* as heterosexual marriage, so excluding from the institution the only people with a growing interest in it, as well as excluding them from humanity made in the image of God, which is to say from humanity itself.

So, to take but one of many examples, in 2009 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter on marriage.⁶⁸ The letter affirms the two ends of marriage as union and procreation, and in that order. It is the community of the two—which formulation is perhaps preferable to John Paul II's "unity of the two"—which comes first. This priority answers to a theology that would find the paradigm of marriage in the union of Christ and his Church, but perhaps it is also a memory, however faint, that for Paul, and for several of the fathers, marriage was not for the having of children but the putting out of lust.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, procreation follows as the second good of marriage, though not of every marriage. The bishops' letter insists that childless marriages are still marriages, even though this would seem to make procreation less intrinsic to

⁶⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* (Washington DC: USCCB Publishing, 2009). This letter locates the *imago Dei* in community rather than nuptiality. It resides in a person's ability to enter into community with another and with others, and the supporting text for this view is John Paul II's *Mulieris Dignatem* (1988).

⁶⁹ See Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). Martin feels the need to defend his reading of Paul against the incredulity of both ancient and modern authors, but Thomas had already defended the apostle's belief that marriage cures concupiscence, arguing that the grace of the conjugal union overcomes its lust. []

marriage than the bishops might want to admit.⁷⁰ Indeed, having admitted that the unitive and procreative ends of marriage are not always conjoined, the bishops go on to assert that they are inseparable. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that conjugal love obliges “fidelity and fecundity”. So an infertile marriage, which we are assured is not a failed marriage, must still be ordered “toward the procreative”, if the unitive meaning of marriage is not to be “undermined”.⁷¹ Perhaps this means that the couple must keep on wanting to have children, even though they know they cannot, lest they destroy the community of their union. (Of course in some cases it is just this wanting that does destroy the union.) But this seems almost nonsensical. So perhaps it is not every marriage, but marriage as an institution that is ordered toward procreation? But since it is couples and not institutions that procreate we might have to allow that “procreation” becomes metaphorical of a variety of outcomes, not all of which are the production of children.

However, all of this is by way of prelude, for the chief interest of the bishops’ letter, and, one suspects, the chief reason for it having been written, is the section on “same-sex unions”. For there we are told that the idea of same-sex marriage is “one of the most troubling developments in contemporary culture”. Such a development “harms both the intrinsic dignity of every human person and the common good of society.”⁷²

The legal recognition of same-sex unions poses a multifaceted threat to the very fabric of society, striking at the source from which society and culture come and which they are meant to serve. Such recognition affects all people, married and non-married: not only at the fundamental levels of the good of the spouses, the good of children, the intrinsic dignity of every

⁷⁰ They describe an inability to have children as a tragedy, presumably on the grounds that it frustrates the desire of would-be parents. Of course some couples choose not to have children, but that is said to bespeak a wilfulness that is somehow not there in those who cannot have what they want, or who want clerical celibacy rather than children.

⁷¹ USCCB, *Marriage*, p. 15.

⁷² USCCB, *Marriage*, p. 21.

human person, and the common good, but also at the levels of education, cultural imagination and influence, and religious freedom.⁷³

This remarkable set of claims, though not uncommon in the Catholic Church, would seem improbable, and its substantiation fraught with difficulty. But it is supposed to follow from thinking that the marriage of same-sex couples changes the meaning of “marriage” itself, when marriage is understood to be the union of a man and a woman. And this last is hardly contestable. But the meaning of marriage might be thought more resilient if it were thought to be less about the people united and more about the nature of their union; more about the *community* of the two, the nurturing of self-giving, and the fostering of life.

It is said that the British government instituted same-sex civil partnerships rather than same-sex marriages because it did not want to prolong battle with the churches over what for many was but a matter of terminology.⁷⁴ Partnerships are marriages in all but name. And though any such presumed equality was protested by the churches and other Christian bodies, the Catholic Church admitted as much when it recognized that many people could not tell the difference.⁷⁵ But the Church thinks there is a difference and it is the difference of the sexes. As the United States Bishops insist, “[m]ale-female complementarity is intrinsic to marriage”,⁷⁶ and this complementarity is the crucial point. It is not really that the couple should be able to have children, since the bishops have had to allow that there can be true marriages where there is no prospect of children. It is also the case that same-sex couples can have children by many of the same means as employed by other-sex couples. But what same-sex couples cannot do is repeat the scripted complementarity of male and female; the requirement that one be subordinate to the other. This is the claim that

⁷³ USCCB, *Marriage*, p. 23.

⁷⁴ The 2004 Civil Partnership Act came into effect throughout the United Kingdom in 2005, apart from the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, where similar provisions did not become lawful until 2011.

⁷⁵ Bishop John Hine, writing on behalf of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, in his September 2003 submission to the British government’s consultation document on “Civil Partnerships: A Framework for the Legal Recognition of Same-Sex Couples”, admitted that a civil partnership would be “tantamount to civil marriage in all but name”.

⁷⁶ USCCB, *Marriage*, p. 21.

should be taken most seriously. Other claims in the letter are less persuasive, and especially the claim that it would be an injustice for the State to sanction same-sex marriage. For no one is proposing to ban other-sex marriage, and if the latter is what the Church claims it to be then there is nothing that the State can do to alter its ontology. To think that it could would be to suppose marriage a more socially contingent reality than the Church wants to admit.

Conclusion

There is no need to denigrate Fergus Kerr's telling of Thomas' fate at the hands of Catholic theologians in the twentieth century. Instead, we can learn from his warnings regarding nuptial mysticism. Nor do we need to denigrate marriage, or to make it the image of God in us. John Paul II's interest in community—which we can see in the marital community of the two—can be a sufficient supplement, if a supplement is needed, for older ways of thinking the *imago Dei*. And the Church can do this if it doesn't panic over the advent of same-sex marriages, and in fact comes to see that the theology for their blessing is already in place, and has been ever since Christ became bridegroom to his male disciples.⁷⁷ And when it sees this, the Church will no longer need to exclude homosexuals from participating in God's image, from that living with others which marks out the difference of the human from the non-human. But that day may be far off, and until it arrives, Fergus Kerr's ecclesial farce remains as black as black comedy can be.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ See further Gerard Loughlin, "Introduction: The End of Sex" in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 1-34 (pp. 1-4).

⁷⁸ An earlier version of this chapter was read to the Research Seminar of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Nottingham. I would like to thank Karen Kilby for the invitation to give the paper and for the trenchant comments it received from, in particular, Philip Goodchild, Alison Milbank, John Milbank and Simon Oliver. I would also like to thank Tina Beattie and Gavin D'Costa for subsequent comments. Needless to say, none are responsible for my failure to heed their always-valued advice.